

# Lucia Nixon interviews Philip Pullman

Lucia Nixon interviewed Philip Pullman on 24 June (soon after Midsummer's Day), in the Botanic Garden opposite Magdalen College in Oxford.

**LN: Did you read classical myths as a child?**

PP: I did read classical myths, and I don't remember which book it was in, but it had illustrations done in sepia monochrome, late Victorian paintings by people like Lord Leighton and that sort of thing. Some stories I responded to at once like Theseus and the Minotaur and others I wasn't so keen on, but that was my first exposure to these things. But I didn't read the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* until I was teaching.

**Did you do Latin at school?**

I studied Latin from the age of about seven as I went to prep school. And then we did Latin at my secondary school from the age of eleven and I did it at 'O' Level and then I had to do it again to come to Oxford to pass the Oxford entrance exam. And then I had to do a bit more for my Prelims. In those days I was reading English and you had to do Latin. We had to do a book, whatever it was ...

***Aeneid* Book VI?**

It probably was. But by that time it was just a chore and I didn't really enjoy it. But I do appreciate having learned Latin at school – having been made to pass exams in Latin which perhaps isn't the same thing – because I do think that the structure of the language is visible on the surface; the inflections give you that sense of the structure of a sentence. And I think that's incredibly important when it comes to understanding simple things like subject and object like agreement of noun and adjective and all those things. It's much easier to see that from Latin than it is from English.

**So it was literally pure unadulterated Latin-learning, with nothing about the ancient world to put the Latin in context?**

No, none of that. That all came in after I left. No, we did pure Latin straight down the middle – grammar, grammar, grammar. *Kennedy's Latin Primer*.

**When I re-read the books this time I was surprised not only by how many classical bits and pieces there were, but also by the sharp polarity between Latin and Greek. Almost anything that had a**

**Greek name was a very good thing, and often significant as well – Lyra herself, daemons, the Alethiometer, the Chthonic Railway Station, St Sophia's College, Pantalaimon, Xaphania, Tony Makarios, Teukros Basilides, the Order of St Philomel. But the Latin terms -- Magisterium, Consistorial Court, Stelmara (Lord Asriel's daemon) the General Oblation Board, the Intercessors, intercision -- after a while you realise that almost all of those are going to be bad. Was that on purpose?**

Well, it wasn't on purpose, but you're absolutely right. That's fascinating. I hadn't spotted that for a moment.

**Your earlier books aren't obviously classical at all. So was it the classicism of Milton in *Paradise Lost*, or was it the grandeur of theme that made for so many classical overtones and undertones in *His Dark Materials*?**

The previous books I've written, you're quite right, are different in scope, I suppose you could say, different in nature too. *His Dark Materials* has to be called a fantasy. I say has to be called because I'm not really happy with that word as a description and I don't think I'm doing what most fantasy does and there are various other reservations I have about it. But I have to admit reluctantly and grudgingly it isn't actually completely 100% realist. You get talking bears who wear armour, you're not really in the realms of the real. We're already in a kind of world which is almost continuous with the mythological world, a world in which it's possible to conceive of powers such as gods or angels intervening in human affairs. And because I'm at ease in this world – the world of fantasy – it's not too difficult for me to reach to find parallels and images, or even, you know, rhetorical tricks like the epic simile that turns up a couple of times or more.

**There are two really juicy epic similes in *Northern Lights* quite close together in the big fight.**

Well, they come straight out of the sort of thing that Milton is doing in *Paradise Lost*. *Paradise Lost* was my sort of starting point for the atmosphere of the landscapes in *Northern Lights*, especially books one and two of *Paradise Lost* which I studied for 'A' level and relished – I loved them, I adored the language, I adored the whole imaginative world, I adored the music of

the work. Some passages which I'd read just once or twice stayed with me word for word, line for line for years and years and years. I can still quote them now. I'm responding to something in the particular nature of Milton, because other lines from other poems have stayed with me for years as well. I think the music of Milton is much under-rated, he is the most wonderfully rich and sensuous poet in his command of language. Is it that, or is it something in the nature of epic which is present in Milton and present in Homer and Virgil – well that would be a sense of largeness of scale, perhaps, of grandeur of conception of something: a sense that large events of great importance are being carried by larger than life characters against a background which is spacious, and that sort of thing. I think that was the sense I had from it but it very much came to me through Milton.

**One of the differences between Homer and Virgil which Milton may also have seen is between primary and secondary epic. In secondary epic the world changes because hugely important things happen. In *Aeneid* VI, for example, Aeneas goes down to the underworld, where he sees the grandeur of Rome and the vision of its future, and the world turns on that, just as the fate of the world turns on Will and Lyra's visit to a very classical underworld where it's all dark and grey and you have to get to it by a boat with a Charon-like ferryman.**

When I was describing the underworld I thought that this has been so well visualised and so clearly described by far greater writers than I, I can't improve on this. The best thing I can do is take what they've done and build on it – add my gargoyle to this little corner of the edifice or whatever it is. If I build any originality into it, it's my explanation of storytelling as a way out. When I got Will and Lyra into the underworld of the dead, I had to get them out again, but I didn't see before they were there how to do it. However, everything in the way Lyra had reacted to the world before that implied that she would try and tell a story or a lie to get herself out of it. And this got her out of all sorts of difficulties before but this is the biggest, this is the worst, this is the most horrible. You can't get her out of this. And so by accident, as it were, because the ghosts don't want made-up stories, they want the truth – tell us what it was like

living a life, remind us what the wind was like, tell us what it was like playing in the sun. And so when Lyra tells the ghosts a true story, she discovers that telling the truth will satisfy the hunger of the ghosts and of the Harpies and they can use that to make a bargain.

**But why did you call them Harpies and not Furies?**

Well, of course the harpies in *The Amber Spyglass* are directly inspired by the Furies in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. But why Harpies? Because Harpies for me ... this is an entirely personal thing. When I was about sixteen, I had a sort of emotional-cum-imaginative crisis, and this was embodied for me by the figure of a Harpy which I seemed to see or talk to.

**While Homer's Penelope is intelligent and resourceful, most strong female characters in ancient epic tend to be doomed in some way, like Dido and Camilla in Virgil's *Aeneid*. But your trilogy has two important characters, Lyra and Will.**

It was always my intention to have the two children there. It's not exclusively Lyra's story, it's not exclusively Will's story. I suppose in a way you could say that it's mainly the story of Sophia, wisdom. I'm consciously aware of the importance of the Sophia figure in the Gnostic heresy which flowered in the early Christian era. It tells the most extraordinary and compelling story about our origins, but it discounts the physical world and the thing I wanted to stress all the way through is the absolute beauty and importance and primacy of the physical world.

**There's that wonderful Romanesque sculpture from Autun of Eve 'swimming' towards the apple of wisdom. Sophia's out there and we must reach out and get to her or it.**

Well, I'm all in favour of that. That's very much the kind of movement of the psyche that I'm in favour of, I want to describe. In the Old Testament Book of Proverbs, Wisdom is given a female presence. Whether the Hebrews who wrote Proverbs conceived of the Sophia, the wisdom, as being a sort of personal presence like Yahweh or not, she's very strongly present there, and a very attractive figure too.

**The trilogy also has quite a few hints of Plato: having a daemon (well, perhaps that is Socratic, not Platonic); being very keen on truth (*aletheia*); a computer called The Cave, in which you might see shadows...**

Yes, well, it has always been said that all Western philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato. Maybe everything else is. Yes, you can't get away from Plato. Although I find myself passionately in disagreement

with the notion that this world is just a series of rough approximations to a better world which is somewhere else, nevertheless that, too, is an extraordinarily powerful idea which has fuelled two and a half thousand years of all kinds of speculation which shows little sign of running short yet. So it's a mighty idea. There are echoes and correspondences and shadows of this throughout my work, I'm sure, because of that.

**Plato does crop up more often in children's books than people might think.**

Well, Plato crops up explicitly in C. S. Lewis in the Narnia books towards the end. [And also in his *Till We Have Faces*. -LN]

**And in Mary Poppins [*Mary Poppins Opens the Door*], along with lots of other Greek stuff.**

I don't think any idea is too difficult for children, except maybe the subtler parts of Jacques Derrida ... but I think that most notions that have been covered in Western schools over two thousand years or whatever are possible to illustrate for children by means of a story. If it's an involving story with characters they like and incidents that they are excited by and want to find out what happens next then children can take in a great deal of what might pass for philosophy or classics or whatever on the way.

**The other thing is this business of the city as the best possible community in which to live, because Plato's *Republic* isn't a country, it's a city.**

I'm in considerable sympathy with that. A city is the best place to live. A village is too small, a country's too big, an empire's impossible, a city is about the right size. A city is about the right size for you not to know everybody but to be recognised by enough people, to have circles of friends which overlap with other people you can get to know. It's big enough for there to be civic and cultural structures that are bigger than any individual could set up on their own, it's big enough to have repositories of learning such as libraries and museums and art galleries, and what have you.

**Oxford looms rather large as a city which ought to be the right kind of place for such perfectibility to happen.**

Well, that's a theme which I've addressed explicitly in the little book that's coming out in October called *Lyra's Oxford*. But there are other cities that I'm going to visit in the next book about Lyra, which will be called *The Book of Dust*, Palmyra for one.

**So we can expect further classical inspirations?**

Yes indeed.

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